Exploring Humor Dynamics: Cognitive Discourse Markers in Matt Rife's Stand-Up Comedy

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Abstract- Discourse markers (DMs) play a crucial role in making conversations clear and smooth, but their function in stand-up comedy remains underexplored. While previous research has examined DMs in speeches and films, little attention has been given to their use in comedy. This study focuses on cognitive DMs, which reflect thinking processes, elaboration, or self-correction, and analyzes their use in Matt Rife's stand-up routine. Unlike other DMs, cognitive DMs convey the speaker's mental state, guide the audience's comprehension, and signal self-monitoring, all of which are integral to the comedic performance. The descriptive qualitative method was used to examine a popular 2023 stand-up special, focusing on how Rife uses these markers to structure his jokes and connect with the audience. This study found 151 cognitive DMs, categorized into four types: elaboration such as "like", thinking processes like "um", Assessment of the listener's knowledge about utterances like "you know what I mean", and self-correction "I mean". The most frequently used marker was "like," primarily serving the function of elaboration. The study shows that cognitive DMs help with timing, clarifying jokes, and engaging the audience. This research sheds light on how DMs are used in comedy and suggests that further study could improve our understanding of their role in making humor effective and engaging.

Keywords: Discourse Markers, Cognitive Discourse Markers, Stand-Up Comedy, Humor

I. INTRODUCTION

Discourse markers (DMs) are important in communication because they help connect different parts of speech or writing, making conversations and texts flow smoothly and stay cohesive. They do not directly affect grammar, but they play a key role in showing how ideas relate to each other and in guiding the conversation's direction. In Sedeng (2017) article, it is mentioned that there is a phenomenon of cross-language occurrences, which the author refers to as syntactical markers. The article notes that, commonly, we encounter active, passive, and objective voice markers, often found as prefixes to verbs.

In stand-up comedy, DMs are particularly diverse and serve specific purposes. Maschler (2009) categorizes them into four types: interpersonal markers like "you know" and "okay" that denote social functions; referential markers such as "so" and "but" that indicate logical relationships; structural markers like "now" and "yeah" that signal discourse progression and turn-taking; and cognitive markers such as "well" and "I think" that reflect the speaker's thought processes. these markers are crucial for keeping the audience engaged. Whether a comedian is performing live or sharing videos on platforms like YouTube or TikTok, they use markers like "you know," "okay," "so," and "but" to connect with listeners, transition between jokes, and convey their thoughts. These

markers help comedians navigate through topics ranging from politics to personal stories, using casual language to make their audience laugh and stay interested. In this article, the focus will be on cognitive discourse markers. According to Fraser (1999), these markers play a crucial role in guiding the listener's interpretation and facilitating effective communication by providing cues about the speaker's mental state and the organization of information in discourse.

In spontaneous speech, coherence or the flow of speech may be disrupted when the speaker shifts topics covertly or without signaling, or when the listener needs to infer meaning. Cognitive DMs guide the listener in forming a mental representation of the conversation. DMs in this category indicate the thought process such as "well", "I think", "I see", clarifying like "I mean", "that is", "in other words", expand upon like "like", "I mean", indicate hesitation "well, "sort of", and gauge the listener's understanding of the speech "you know". These markers facilitate a collaborative construction of meaning.

Stand-up comedy is a suitable data source for studying cognitive DMs because it often involves unscripted language with lengthy, one-way communication. Therefore, a stand-up comedian must carefully control their language and delivery flow for the humor to be effective. In live performances, comedians frequently need to think and improvise spontaneously. This is where cognitive DMs like "well" and "I mean" are needed to organize ideas, clarify statements, and ensure smooth delivery of their material. Since stand-up does not have direct audience responses, unlike regular conversations, these markers are essential to help comedians maintain control and continuity in their performances. Understanding these dynamics could provide valuable insights into how humor and timing interact with linguistic structures, as well as how comedians represent their mental states or the conversational strategies they employ in the one-way interactions they create. This would ultimately enrich our broader understanding of cognitive DMs across various communicative scenarios.

This study aims to analyze cognitive DMs in stand-up comedy, focusing on Matt Rife's comedy performances. Matt Rife, a comedian and actor from the United States, started his career at the age of 15 and has since toured globally, sharing the stage with notable comedians like Dane Cook and Ralphie May. He holds the distinction of being the youngest regular performer at the Laugh Factory. The researcher chose Matt Rife's stand-up comedy video titled "Matt Rife: Matthew Steven Rife (Full Special)" as a data source because it is widely viewed and also features stories about the speaker, Matt, including the story about his grandfather who had passed away just a few weeks before the show was recorded. This is particularly interesting because it explores how someone can share personal life stories intertwined with comedy and laughter, and how Matt delivers the story.

Many studies have discussed about DMs. However, they vary in their theoretical frameworks and data sources. Each study contributes valuable insights into how discourse markers function within different contexts of communication. Cahyanti (2022) analysed Hugh Jackman's speech using Fraser's theory, examining contrastive, elaborative, and inferential markers in spoken discourse. Fitriyatul (2019) explored discourse markers in the movie "The Chronicles of Narnia" using Fraser's theory, categorizing them into contrastive, elaborative, inferential, and temporal types. Aditana (2020) focused on Steve Jobs' speeches with Schriffin's theory, investigating discourse markers and their influence within specific social contexts. Kusumayati (2020) studied discourse markers in written essays by EFL learners, employing Fraser's taxonomy to observe proficiency-related differences in marker usage. Ayomi et al. (2024) analysed discourse markers with a focus on the use of DMs in a podcast video entitled "How to Stop Insecurity & Truly Love Yourself to the Core", featuring Selena Gomez and Jay Shetty. The study's goal was to recognize the different kinds and purposes of DMs used in casual conversations between these two renowned individuals. And Luh et al. (2024) have a study titled "Discourse Markers in Talk Shows: The Case Study of The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon." study sought to identify the types and roles of discourse markers found in spoken language, with a particular focus on casual public conversations, by applying Fraser's (2009) theory. Lastly, Wijayanti et al. (2019) examined DMs in conversations among Psychology students using Schriffin's theory, identifying types of markers and assessing their appropriateness.

Despite substantial research on DMs in various contexts including speeches, movies, and casual conversations, there remains a significant

gap in exploring how cognitive DMs function in comedy. This gap is important because comedy, with its unique timing, improvisation, and interactional strategies, offers a distinct context in which DMs may perform different functions compared to other genres. Understanding this gap is crucial for both linguistic studies and the broader understanding of humor dynamics. Comedy often hinges on subtle shifts in meaning, tone, and timing, and cognitive DMs likely play an important role in managing these elements. Filling this gap will enhance our understanding of cognitive DMs' role in shaping not only the flow of humor but also the comedian's self-presentation and audience engagement.

This study aims to analyze the use of cognitive DMs in stand-up comedy, focusing on how Matt Rife employs them in his performance. Specifically, the research will explore how these DMs contribute to the effectiveness of his comedic delivery, how they facilitate audience engagement, and how they reflect the comedian's thought processes and self-monitoring during performance.

II. METHODS

This study focuses on analyzing discourse markers in Stand-up comedy, using the sample of Matt Rife's stand-up comedy video, which was uploaded on YouTube on April 4th, 2023, with the duration of the video is 1 hour 13 minutes and has garnered 21 million views with 668 thousand likes. Matt Rife, a well-known comedian and actor who started his career at a young age, has performed internationally and is recognized for being the youngest regular performer at the Laugh Factory. Performing alongside other famous comedians such as Dane Cook, Ralphie May, and others. He makes jokes with his own name as the title to build friendship and rapport with his fans, allowing them to get to know Matt Rife better by incorporating various current issues around us, such as gender deviations or fashion. His comedy routines often incorporate current social issues to connect with his audience.

The data for this study were collected directly from the video and its transcript downloaded from Youtube. The analysis employed a descriptive qualitative method, Rahardjo (2010) noted that qualitative research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being examined. applying theories from Maschler (2009) and Fung & Carter (2007), on the classification of the DMs.

To ensure the reliability of the analysis, consistency was maintained by applying predefined criteria for identifying cognitive discourse markers (DMs), based on Fraser's (1999) framework. The analysis focused on Matt Rife's stand-up performance, with particular attention given to the use of cognitive DMs that indicate thinking processes, elaboration, or self-correction. The DMs were identified and categorized according to their function in guiding the audience's understanding and contributing to the flow of the performance.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this research, the researchers found 151 cognitive discourse markers with 4 different types classified by Fung & Carter (2007) and Maschler & Schiffrin (2015) The Cognitive type, specifically the elaboration "like", was found to be the most common, with 90 uses. The tables below illustrate the arrangement of cognitive discourse marker types based on their frequency of usage, from the most commonly used to the least.

Table 1. Types of cognitive DMs found in stand-up comedy video.

No	Types of DMs	Discours markers	frequency
1	Elaboration	"like"	90
		"it's like"	2
		"i'm like"	2
2	Denote thinking process	"oh"	22
		"um"	13
3	Assessment of the listener's knowledge about utterances	"right?"	6
		"you know what i mean?"	9
4	Self-correction reformulation	"i mean"	7
			151

Cognitive discourse markers are employed to express the thought processes of speakers during conversation. Maschler (2009) elaborated on this, stating that these markers indicate the act of thinking, recognizing new information, or the necessity to rephrase previous statements in order to enhance understanding, especially in informal and entertaining communication like stand up comedy.

a) Markers for Discourse Elaboration
In informal conversations, individuals often

use cognitive discourse markers. These markers help expand or illustrate the preceding statement. An example of a cognitive DM used to elaborate in a sentence is the phrase "like". Fox Tree (2007) said The way "like" is used might be too subtle for ordinary people to explain. "like" can show a difference between what is said and what is meant. The use of "like" as a cognitive discourse marker is crucial for expanding and clarifying statements in conversation. When speakers employ "like," they are typically adding further explanation or context to their earlier remarks. This marker helps to elaborate on a point by providing additional details or examples, making the information more accessible and understandable for the listener. "Like" can also indicate a shift in how information is presented, allowing the speaker to refine their message or clarify their intentions. Essentially, "like" acts as a bridge in communication, offering extra layers of meaning or illustrative comparisons to ensure that the audience fully comprehends the speaker's message. Excerpt 1 will show the example of "like" as what is meant.

Excerpt 1:
*You ever meet a gay dude? They're in great shape, every fucking time, man. It's so impressive. Gay dudes stay in gym. That's guy's name, Jim. They just stay there. They're just turning out, burning calories, dog. It's dedication you better respect -it. That's next level fitness, bro. that's the level of in shape, **like**, you could fight off another grown man if you wanted to.*

Matt uses the word "like" to further explain the meaning of his previous statement. When he says "that's the level of fitness, like," he is preparing the listener for the next statement, "you could fight off another grown man if you wanted to," which indicates that this statement directly relates to his earlier comment about fitness levels. This technique builds anticipation and emphasizes the final statement as the meaning of what he said before.

Besides "like" another example of elaboration is the use of "It's like" in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 2:
*I hate it so much, man. I have so many red flags now, bro. and no patience. That's the main thing. **It's like**, I've been let down so many times.*

In excerpt 2, "it's like" serves as an elaboration tool because it introduces additional explanation or detail about the speaker's emotions. When the speaker says, "It's like, I've been let down so many times," Matt uses the DM to provide more context and clarity about their earlier frustration with having "so many red flags" and "no patience." This phrase helps to elaborate on his feelings by offering a more detailed example or comparison, making his point clearer for the listener.

b) Markers Indicating Thought Processes

In conversations, Hudson Kam & Edwards (2008) describe cognitive DMs like "uh", "um", and "hm" as signals that indicate a speaker is in the process of retrieving information they want to share. These markers serve as delay indicators and are considered a form of repair strategy. They act as fillers that occasionally appear in natural speech, affecting its flow. Essentially, these filled pauses suggest a momentary delay before the speaker proceeds with providing the intended information. This phenomenon is evident in the following excerpt from a conversation:

Excerpt 3:
*Listen, listen for one second. **Um**, first and foremost, thank you all so much.*

Figure 1. Matt Rife: Matthew Steven Rife (FULL SPECIAL)
Source:
https://youtu.be/1AwsR1iqsuE?si=LixzuMLu0VdB8bX-

Matt felt deeply moved by his loyal stand-up comedy audience, with every sentence eliciting laughter and the crowd being willing to laugh along. Matt was especially touched by these moments, particularly since the stand-up comedy was dedicated to his beloved grandfather who had passed away just two weeks before this show. Matt was uncertain about what to say to his fans. Initially, he asked them to listen to him for a few seconds, then there was a brief pause as a sign that Matt was thinking. Matt responds with the word "um" followed by a pause, indicating that he is thinking about the sentence he wants to say next. Matt uttered the word "um" as signals that indicate a speaker is in the process of retrieving information and as a pause to create

anticipation for the audience to listen more closely to the next sentence that will be spoken.

Another use is the "oh" to denote the thinking process in this stand-up comedy.

Excerpt 3:

Can I see your phone? There we go, pass it over. **Oh**. *This is great.*

In the example above, the word "oh" is used to denote Matt's thinking process, often indicating that the speaker is pausing to reflect, reconsider, or formulate their next thoughts or response. After Matt says "can I see your phone?" he might receive some new information after looking at the phone. Matt uses "oh" to create a brief pause before moving on to the next sentence. So the word "oh" can occur when people are receiving information and finally realizing something. "Oh" serves as a filler that shows Matt is mentally adjusting to the new input. It helps to convey that he is momentarily processing or reflecting on the information he has just received, making it a marker of his thought process.

c) Markers for Assessing Listener Engagement

The discourse marker like "you know what I mean?" is often used at the end of a sentence. Although it may sound like a question, it's not actually seeking agreement from the listener. By using "you know what I mean?", the speaker is trying to make sure that their message is clear, and that the listener is following along. It helps to confirm that the listener has the same understanding of the topic or situation being discussed. This phrase helps the speaker gauge whether their words have been effective and if the listener is on the same page. It's a way of making sure that communication is smooth and that there's no confusion about what is being talked about. These meanings indicate two functions of "you know what I mean?" in discourse: first, "you know what I mean?" serves as an indicator of shared understanding between the speaker and listener, and second, it functions as a marker of awareness about commonly known information (Schiffrin, 1987) In excerpt 4, this is an example of the function of "you know what I mean?" as an indicator of shared understanding between the speaker and listener.

Excerpt 4:

I've been let down so many times. Lile, now, if I see something that triggers a red flag in me, I'm gone. I'm not gonna wait around to be inevitably let down, you know what I mean? It's a waste of time.

The phrase "you know what I mean?" in the sentence is a confirmation and empathy from the listener. By using this phrase, Matt invites acknowledgment of their feelings and experiences, establishing a connection and ensuring mutual understanding regarding the topic. It enhances the conversational flow by prompting the listener to engage with Matt's emotional stance, fostering a more meaningful interaction. By confirming the question, listeners will experience what the speaker is feeling, allowing them to enter the speaker's situation while telling the story and feel the same way as the speaker. For example, Matt. Since stand-up comedy is a one-way communication, where only Matt speaks, Matt makes sure to use phrases like "you know what I mean?" to ensure that his meaning gets across to the audience. Moreover, in this conversation, Matt is expressing how he feels when something triggers him.

There is also the use of "right?" as an action by the speaker to question the listener's knowledge about the utterance.

Excerpt 5:

..... I'm okay with that because I don't need to impress everybody. The same way you wouldn't try to be friends with everybody, **right***?*

Here, the use of "right?" is employed to seek the audience's opinion on the previous statement. It also serves as a way to assess whether the listeners understand what Matt has said. This helps ensure that the audience is not misled by the information provided and that they share a similar understanding or mindset with Matt.

d) Markers for Self-correction or Reformulation

Some cognitive discourse markers can be used to rephrase or clarify something that speakers have previously stated. Self-correction occurs when a speaker realizes that something they just said might be incorrect or unclear and promptly makes a correction. For example, if someone says, "I went to the store yesterday, I mean, last week," they are fixing their mistake about the time frame. This process helps to ensure that the information shared is accurate and easy to understand.

Reformulation, on the other hand, involves rephrasing or restating something to enhance clarity or precision. For instance, if someone says, "She's a really good athlete, I mean, she's incredibly skilled at sports," the phrase "I mean" is used to clarify and provide a more detailed explanation of the original point. Reformulation

improves the speaker's message by offering an alternative way to express the same idea, which helps the listener comprehend it better.

An example of this is seen in the use of "I mean" in excerpt 6 below:

Excerpt 6:

Nobody in this world dresses better than a gay man. You better respect it. It's pretty impressive. **I mean***, you spend enough time in the closet, you're bound to find something, you know…*

In this sentence, "I mean" is used to expand on the initial idea by connecting the concept of spending time in the closet to developing a sophisticated sense of style. It clarifies that the impressive fashion sense is a result of the time and effort put into it. By saying, "you spend enough time in the closet, you're bound to find something, you know…," the speaker is rephrasing and offering a more detailed explanation of their earlier point. Essentially, "I mean" introduces this explanation to provide a deeper insight into why they believe the fashion sense is so impressive, showing that it's a product of the effort invested in perfecting it. Initially, Matt expresses a somewhat confusing or ambiguous statement linking someone's sexuality to their manner of dress, which might sound offensive to a certain audience. He then follows up with a correction to explain this statement.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study investigates the role of cognitive DMs in stand-up comedy and their impact on humor dynamics. DMs are essential in communication as they connect different parts of speech, facilitating smooth and cohesive exchanges. While they do not affect grammar directly, they guide the relationship between ideas and steer the conversation. In stand-up comedy, various types of DMs, including interpersonal, referential, structural, and cognitive markers, play specific roles. Cognitive DMs, in particular, are crucial for guiding the audience's interpretation and maintaining coherence in spontaneous speech. They help comedians structure their routines, clarify ideas, and manage timing, contributing to effective humor delivery. For example, in Matt Rife's stand-up special, cognitive DMs like "like," "oh," and "you know what I mean?" are used to elaborate, signal pauses, and engage the audience.

The use of "like" helps to elaborate or clarify Matt's sentences and builds anticipation,

emphasizing the final statement as the meaning of what was said earlier. This is followed by "oh," which denotes the thinking process and is used 22 times in Matt's stand-up. Matt uses "oh" to create a brief pause before moving on to the next sentence. In assessing the listener's knowledge about utterances, Matt frequently uses phrases like "you know what I mean?" to confirm that listeners connect with his emotions, allowing them to immerse themselves in his experience and share the same feelings while the story is being told. Additionally, in self-correction reformulation, Matt often uses "I mean" to ensure that listeners fully engage with his experience and better understand the intended meaning of the story.

To deepen the understanding of how different types of DMs function in comedy, future studies could explore how various markers beyond cognitive ones contribute to the comedic experience. Investigating these markers across different comedians or cultural contexts would offer a broader view of how humor is crafted and received in diverse settings, enhancing our overall understanding of comedic performance.

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